

# **Performance for Environmental Sustainability in Uganda: A Collective Community Engagement Approach through Theatre for Development**

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## **Introduction**

In *Politics and the Environment: From Theory to Practice*, James Connelly, Graham Smith, David Benson, and Clare Saunders have aptly observed that “the solution to environmental problems is a necessary collective.”<sup>1</sup> This implies that achieving environmental sustainability requires concerted collective community action. Environmental protection practitioners need to mobilize all the stakeholders in the community and engage them in a collective effort to achieve a safe and sustainable environment. The aim of this article is to illustrate the argument that Theatre for Development (TfD) is an effective approach for engaging communities in deepened dialogue about issues pertaining to environmental sustainability. The article argues that theatre provides opportunities for communities to build longer-term strategies for transforming the political realities in which they live.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Walukuba TfD Project**

The article discusses my experience with the Walukuba TfD project in Jinja City, in Eastern Uganda. This project was implemented beginning in early 2015 and ended with community wide performances in June 2015. Unique about this project was the fact that community engagement transformed from being facilitator-centered to a community led process. Members of the community took self-initiatives to mobilize and lead the process of community analysis, theatre-making, and performance. The project was led by Jane Plastow and Kate McQuaid, two experienced applied theatre practitioners from the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. I was privileged to participate in the project as a researcher and participant observer for six months at the invitation of Plastow and McQuaid.

The project was implemented in a context of widespread environmental challenges in Eastern Uganda, particularly the sugarcane plantation industry which had led to extensive denudation of soil and water resources in the region. Until the expansion of the sugarcane

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<sup>1</sup> James Connelly, Graham Smith, David Benson et. al., *Politics and the Environment: From Theory to Practice* (London: Routledge, 2012), 142.

<sup>2</sup> Ananda Breed, “Environmental Aesthetics, Social Engagement and Aesthetic Experiences in Central Asia,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 20, no. 1 (2015): 88.

business in the 1990s and the rise in population, the areas surrounding the Lake Victoria basin in Eastern Uganda were home to the Mabira forest, one of the largest natural forest resources in Uganda. By the time of the implementation of the Walukuba project, a big area of the Mabira forest had been cut down and used to establish large sugarcane plantations. As of today, what used to be the expansive Mabira forest only exists in patches along the Jinja-Kampala highway. The choice of Walukuba as the location for the Tfd project was influenced by these larger environmental problems.

Walukuba is a peri-urban area that was established during the 1960s by the British colonial administration to house council staff. By the time of the implementation of the Walukuba Tfd project, the area was the epicenter of widespread environmental challenges. The challenges had been exacerbated by an expatriate industrial community that did not follow environmental sustainability requirements. As a result, the area had been polluted by untreated industrial waste which threatened the lives of the people.

The Walukuba Tfd project deployed various participatory theatre techniques to mobilize various groups of stakeholders, namely the politicians, the civil servants, the local community and the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). The Tfd facilitators from the United Kingdom worked closely with the practitioners from Uganda, particularly from Makerere University and the NGO community in Jinja to implement a highly engaging Tfd process. The process was effective in empowering communities to identify the problems that hindered the progress of the communities to fuller human lives. I noted that the team of facilitators were creative in their approach by empowering the community to participate in the theatre performance space with freedom and enthusiasm. It was interesting how the practitioners made an effort to dissolve the power accruing from their high economic and academic status. The practitioners avoided entering the community as all-knowing persons who had come to develop the people and transform them from their development challenges. Rather, they deployed relevant techniques of participatory action research which prompted communities to engage in a dialogical encounter with each other.

### **The Significance of Participatory Research in the Tfd Process**

The Walukuba Tfd project adopted an endogenous process in which the very people who suffered the devastating effects of environmental degradation participated in a collective process of making their world better.<sup>3</sup> Commenting about best practices in Tfd, Dale L. Byam posits

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<sup>3</sup> See Kennedy C. Chinyowa, *Play as Aesthetic in African Theatre for Development* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009); Kennedy C. Chinyowa, "Participation as 'Repressive Myth': A Case Study of the Interactive Themba Theatre Organisation in South Africa," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 20, (1 March 2015): 37–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2014.975109>; Kees Epskamp, "Theatre in Search for Social Change: The Relative Significance of Various Theatrical Approaches" in *The Hague: Centre for the Study of Education in the Developing Countries* (CESO 1989); Patrick Mangeni, "Negotiating Gender Through Theatre for Development." (PhD diss., Griffith University, 2007).

that, “the key determinant of the effectiveness of Theatre for Development continues to be the degree of popular participation throughout the process”<sup>4</sup> The community participated in analyzing environmental issues, discussing development priorities, making theatre, and performing in community-based theatre. This led to a deepened process of cultural synthesis in which participants learned from each other’s experiences. The whole process had to do with placing the communities at the center of analyzing their development needs through various methods of codification and performance.

To achieve participation of the community, the project adopted a participatory action research paradigm.<sup>5</sup> The techniques of participatory research employed were emancipatory and deeply rooted in Freirian pedagogy. The process promoted methodologies that were collaborative and committed to identifying and challenging unequal power relations. The aim of the participatory action research process was to enable the community to identify the social, political and economic conditions which affected their lives in order to empower them to take action for environmental sustainability. Evidently, the practitioners aimed to eradicate top-down approaches to development and adopt action oriented strategies through a process of collective education.

One of the participatory frameworks deployed in the Walukuba TfD project was the technique of peer group formation. In this technique, the mobilized community comprising about 60 participants was divided into groups based on age and gender. Consequently, there were four groups formed from the mobilized core group. These included the children aged 8-14 years, young men aged 15-24 years, young women aged 16-25 years and the group of elders ranging from the age of 35 and above and composed of both men and women. The aim of peer group formation was to foster a safe atmosphere in which participants would share their stories with freedom, without fear of being judged. I noted that in the group of elders, men, and women chose to be in the same group because they felt they could work together.

The approaches adopted in participatory action research were wide ranging and they included image theatre, drawing, letter writing, games and exercises, and simultaneous dramaturgy. Through these approaches, the TfD process was able to empower the members of the community to unearth deep seated realities underlying their conditions of living. In the letter writing technique, for example, participants were invited to write letters expressing various concerns in the community. Various peer groups wrote letters expressing their concerns to different stakeholders such as elders, politicians, factory proprietors and the policy makers. Having written their letters, the peer members would read them to their group. This would be followed by a process of dialogue and discussion about the issues raised in the letter. The

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<sup>4</sup> Dale L. Byam, *Communities in Motion: Theatre for Development in Africa* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development: A Critical Approach* (Bristol: The Policy Press University of Bristol, 2005).

ensuing debate would be a lively one with communities displaying agency to transform their challenges.

In order to illustrate the letter-writing technique, this article presents some letter-writing scenarios. There was a letter written by one of the young men and addressed to the elders. The letter read:

Dear elders, you play an important role in making decisions which affect our society. The challenge, however, is you are advocating for the establishment of new industries without putting in place strategies to conserve the environment. What strategies are you putting in place to conserve the environment?<sup>6</sup>

This letter was followed by a moment of analysis and reflection where a number of issues arose. Two issues stood out prominently: What should be done to conserve the environment? Here, the reflection was two-pronged. On one hand, the young men were asking the elders what they were doing to conserve the environment, while on the other the young people were being challenged to consider what they were doing to conserve the environment. In the process of dialogue and reflection, the young men invited the elders to lead the process of protecting the environment. The process of dialogue and reflection took the course of supporting young people to work closely with the elders to protect the environment. There was another letter written by one of the young women addressed to the elders. The letter read:

Dear elders, we request you to ensure that property belonging to orphans are protected. We request that caretakers should stop grabbing property belonging to orphans. We also want to remind you about the problem of underage sex and rape. You send young girls to go to the market late in the evening. This exposes them to the danger of being raped and defiled.<sup>7</sup>

In the process of reflecting about the letter, a number of deep seated issues affecting the community arose. These included corruption, witchcraft, HIV/AIDs and poverty. It was evident that participatory action research process was empowering the participating community to search and evaluate itself whilst forging a way of improving their situation. The photos below show the community engaging in the process of analysis and reflection upon the letters.

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<sup>6</sup> Walukuba Young People, Personal Message, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Walukuba Young People, Personal Message, 2015.



*Figure 1. Participants analyze and reflect on the letters. Photo by Keneth Bamaturaki.*



*Figure 2. Participants analyze and reflect on the letters. Photo by Keneth Bamaturaki.*

Through a sustained process of participatory action research, the community was empowered to identify a number of problems affecting their lives. They included unsafe water, youths despising low class jobs, rape, gender-based violence, corruption, lack of communication between age groups, particularly elders and youths, degradation of swamps, energy issues (charcoal burning and electricity), littering polythene bags and plastic bottles, and tree cutting among others. Besides unearthing these problems, the participatory action research process enabled the community to identify various opportunities which could be exploited to transform the community. These included intergenerational collaboration for knowledge sharing among different age groups, adoption of energy-saving stoves, practicing pottery, cleaning up the environment, creating of self-help groups, making bio-gas, making crafts from recycled material, planting tree seedlings, making charcoal from garbage, peer education and creating sustainable arts groups among others. Having clearly identified the problems affecting the community and opportunities which could be harnessed to transform the situation, the community of Walukuba was facilitated into a process of further critical analysis and reflection. Describing it as theatre

action research, James Thompson argues that participatory action research is a process that enhances a democracy on the ground.<sup>8</sup> The concept of democracy of the ground used by James Thompson implies that the very people who suffer oppression are empowered to prioritize the kind of development they need. This is very important because it is the local community who feel the pinch of the negative consequences of oppressive situations and consequently they are the ones who understand most the compelling need for change.

### The TfD Process as the Practice of Grassroots Democracy

Tim Prentki and David Pammenter highlight the practice of democracy in TfD and applied theatre in general arguing that “engaging in Theatre places direct democracy at the heart of the political and social transformation, leading to the development of political actors both individually and more importantly in the face of social fragmentation collectively.”<sup>9</sup> Typical of a collective and democratic process described by Prentki and Pammenter, the Walukuba project empowered communities to express their voice and power through problem prioritization and interpretation. The process of problem prioritization empowered participants to choose the most



Figure 3. Participants vote to choose the most pressing problems facing the community. Photo by Keneth Bamuturaki.

<sup>8</sup> James Thompson, *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Tim Prentki and David Pammenter, “Living Beyond Our Means, Meaning Beyond Our Lives: Theatre as education for change” *Applied Theatre Research* 2, no. 1, (2014): 12.

pressing problems and the most helpful opportunities that could be harnessed to transform the lives of the people through a voting process. After the participatory action research process, the facilitators together with the members of the community inscribed all the problems and opportunities identified by the community on large flip charts so that could easily be seen by the participants. In so doing, I observed that the facilitators and the community had taken time to plan for the democratic process of choosing the most pressing problems and the most relevant opportunities. They had planned well to engage in the process. I argue that the act of doing prior planning was a sign that the facilitators were keen to facilitate an effective TfD process. In many instances, when the TfD process has lacked the effect, it was intended to achieve, it has often resulted from a lack of effective planning of the community engagement process. When this happens, it results in trial and error processes which mostly become less dialogical and less engaging. The photos below show the community immersed in a participatory process of choosing their most pressing problems.

The process of voting for the most pressing problems and opportunities was extremely exciting as well as engaging and it progressed in three distinct phases. In the first phase, participants had in their hands three votes. In the second phase, they had two votes. While in the third phase, they had one vote. Participants had the prerogative to emphasize one pressing problem and one most appropriate opportunity by placing all their votes on a particular problem or opportunity. After the first and second voting shifts, problems and opportunities, which had not been chosen were removed. Consequently, after the voting process, what remained were the most pressing problems and opportunities. Evidently, the voting process resembled an exciting theatre game. I noted that participants were happy to use the power of the vote in their hands to highlight the most pressing problems and the most helpful opportunities. I observed that the participatory action research process gave all the members of the participating community equal power and equal opportunities to express this power. Indeed, it was quite a transformative and empowering process.

It was interesting to observe that priority problems and opportunities chosen by the different peer groups were indicative of their unique needs and aspirations. For instance, on one hand, the young men chose poverty, school fees, tree cutting, tribalism, and police violence as their most pressing problems. On the other hand, they chose the option of developing artistic talents, unionization, making crafts, better latrines, and improving nutrition as their most hopeful opportunities. The young women highlighted single motherhood, polygamy, HIV testing and disclosure, underage sex, and tree planting as the most pressing problems. They outlined forming cooperative saving groups, making crafts, developing artist talents, peer education, and family planning as the best opportunities.

It was stimulating to note that some problems and opportunities prioritized across peer groups were similar while others were more unique to particular peer groups. For example, the school fees problem was not critical for the elders. Yet, this was a pressing issue among the

young men and young women. Certain problems and opportunities were unique to certain segments of the community. This augments the significance of participatory action research in the TfD process. It emphasizes the fact that TfD empowers communities to identify the actual problems that affect their lives.

### **Problem Prioritization as a Spur for Performance**

The preceding process became the springboard of collective theatre-making and performance. In devising theatre and performance, it was the prioritized problems and opportunities that became the raw material for storylines of plays and lyrics for poems and popular music. The artistic and theatre-making process was facilitated within the various peer groups. However, there were opportunities for the different peer groups to perform their theatre pieces and popular songs to other peer groups. The photo below illustrates the community performing a play devised from the prioritized issues.



*Figure 4. Participants are performing a play on environmental issues. Photo by Keneth Bamuturaki.*

In the young men's group, volunteers agreed to make a play which would weave together a number of prioritized issues, namely; tree cutting, the welfare of factory workers, poverty, tree cutting, and tree planting. They began by devising a synopsis, which had a protagonist, antagonist, and other supporting characters. The synopsis was as follows:

A woman sets off to the village to see her sick Dad. She is pleased to find him improving and in the garden planting trees. She is excited at seeing her father's work and requests him for seedlings which she will plant upon returning home. While she is away in the village, her husband, a casual factory worker loses his job. He fails to pay school fees and to provide for the family. Upon arrival from



countryside, the woman comes with seedlings but finds the whole home messed up. She reprimands the husband for being irresponsible. The husband decides to go to the field to cut trees to sell to the sugar factory for energy but he is arrested and jailed.<sup>10</sup>

It was enthralling to see how the young men immersed themselves in the process of playmaking. They actively participated in discussing the details of their protagonist and antagonist in a process described as character-building or characterization. Considering the protagonist is the Husband/Father, they asked the questions: What is his name? What is his age? What is the number of his children? As the participants answered these questions, they generated material and dialogue for their play. The process was followed by the enactment of scenes.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that the Tfd process provided opportunities to explore deep-seated issues related to environmental sustainability. The community worked as a collective force to discuss the issues which fostered ownership of the process and the strategic actions agreed upon by the community to transform their situation. The practical process fostered a critical reflective process that sought to empower participating communities to question why things are the way they are. For example, an artistic piece such as a play, poem, or dance always led to another piece that made an effort to interrogate the status quo. The process enabled communities to use their everyday experiences to forge a practical way forward for environmental sustainability. In this way, problems were defined and explored, actions taken, and the results reflected upon. It is fascinating to report that the Walukuba community became self-sustaining. The participants transformed themselves into a community-based organization with the objective of continuing to use arts-based strategies in analyzing problems that impede their progress. This community-based effort which developed from the project still survives to date.

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**Keneth Bamaturaki** achieved his PhD in Drama in 2017 from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom. His research focuses on Theatre for Development and Theatre in Education. He has published several articles in various refereed journals such as *Research in Drama Education; Consciousness, Literature the Arts; Studies in Theatre and Performance and International Journal of Communication;* and *the African Theatre Review*. He currently teaches drama at Kyambogo University in Uganda, where he was also the Head of the Music and Performing Arts Department.

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<sup>10</sup> Walukuba Young Men Group, Play Synopsis, 2015.

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